

Cartoonists' Depictions of the President's Role



Wajira Abeywardana presenting the book to President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

A book launch titled *Press Vs. Prez* was dedicated to President Ranil Wickremesinghe. In his address, President Wickremesinghe extolled the significance of such publications as an integral aspect of the democratic fabric of the nation, emphasizing the freedom entrenched within the country. He contrasted this with the absence of such creations in totalitarian regimes, further highlighting the relevance of the established freedom of expression. The President also expressed his pride in removing criminal defamation laws, thereby reinforcing the government's commitment to democratic values.

Furthermore, President Ranil Wickremesinghe credited the nation's positive economic trajectory to the resilience demonstrated in implementing challenging governmental programs. He expressed optimism that the country is emerging from its trials, heralding a brighter future. The President extended gratitude to the cartoonists whose creations brought joy during difficult times and acknowledged their contribution to lifting spirits.

The book, spanning President Ranil Wickremesinghe's parliamentary journey from June 23, 2021, to May 2023, compiles about 618 cartoons published in newspapers. Contributions from 40 cartoonists and nearly 20 journalists were pivotal in creating this compilation, with special appreciation reserved for the cartoonists and TV anchors who showcased these works on television.

Addressing the gathering, President Ranil Wickremesinghe further commented on the tradition of political cartoons in Sri Lanka, citing examples from the past and lauding the continuation of this tradition admirably by Wajira Abeywardana. He reflected on the period between 2021 and 2023 and shared his memory of a cartoon depicting his swearing-in ceremony as Acting President amidst a tumultuous political climate where violent mobs surrounded the parliament. During this period, the country had to take decisive steps to rebuild its economy and restore peace and stability.

Approximately 2,000 cartoons were produced during this period, underscoring the democratic nature of Sri Lankan society. President Ranil Wickremesinghe expressed his pride in repealing the defamation law, which further strengthened the country's freedom of expression. Today, Sri Lanka enjoys the freedom to write books, produce television and radio programs, and create movies without censorship. This freedom is a testament to the democratic values ingrained in Sri Lankan society since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1931. Despite political challenges, the country has upheld democratic principles, where parties peacefully accept election results, including defeats.

These cartoons symbolize the freedom and vibrancy of Sri Lanka's democracy. As the country approaches the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections later this year, President Ranil Wickremesinghe anticipates an increase in such cartoons showcasing the country's commitment to democratic freedom.



R-L: Mahinda Rajapaksa, former President; Sagala Ratnayaka, chief of staff to the President and National Security Advisor; Saman Ekanayake, Secretary to the President; and Ruwan Wijewardene, Senior advisor to President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Climate change.